

# Classroom Activity: Understanding and Writing a Thesis Statement



## Description:

Students learn criteria for a good persuasive thesis statement, evaluate several examples and write one of their own (can be adapted for specific classroom needs).

## Objectives:

The student will

- Evaluate sample thesis statements by applying criteria of a good thesis.
- Create and critique persuasive thesis statements on a variety of topics.

## Approximate Time Needed:

One to two 50-minute classroom sessions

## Materials Included:

- *Tackling the Thesis Statement (reading)*
- *NHD Grading Rubric: Thesis Statement*
- *Thesis Development Student Worksheet*

## Overview:

### Setting the Stage

Explain to students that today they will be focusing on a very specific skill in writing, but one that will be very important throughout their academic experiences. Ask if they have heard of thesis statements and invite them to share what they remember. Explain that constructing a good thesis statement is the key to successful persuasive writing. Use *Tackling the Thesis Statement* for more information for yourself or your students.

### “The Teacher Might Say...” for Setting the Stage

"Today we are going to talk about a very specific, but very important, skill in persuasive writing. Perhaps some of you already have been introduced to it. It is creating a thesis statement. Have any of you heard this term before? I guarantee you will hear it many, many times throughout your next years in school. Learning to create a strong thesis statement is not easy, and you will be learning how to do it better and better all through high school – even college.

Writing one involves choosing and narrowing a topic to investigate and write about; learning

enough about the subject to be able to take a stand on some aspect of it and support your position with good reasoning; and finally "boiling down" all that into a sentence (or two) that conveys your assertion and gives your readers a kind of map of your paper. Whew! That's a lot to ask of a sentence! But once you have your thesis statement, I think you'll find that you have pretty much written the rest of the paper in your head.

Some of you indicated you had heard the term before. What do you remember about it? *[main idea of a paper, take a pro or con position on an issue, like a topic sentence, but for the whole paper, etc.]* I'd like you to think back to what you know about topic sentences and see how a thesis is similar and how it is different from a topic sentence. Let's put a Venn diagram on the board to compare and contrast these two ...."

## Activity

Next, arrange students in small groups or pairs. Distribute or project the thesis examples found on the following pages (under the headings, "Looking at examples" and "The do's and don'ts of thesis statements"). Ask students to read the statements and discuss in their groups what the statements have in common. Invite groups to report out.

Invite groups to share their findings. Project or distribute the *NHD Grading Rubric: Thesis Statement*. Explain each of the criteria and ask students to apply the criteria to the sample thesis statements. Ask students to identify the assertion and the supporting reasons, then invite them to speculate about what evidence, arguments or reasoning might be presented in a paper.

Ask students to give examples of statements that would NOT meet the criteria (e.g., statements of fact that aren't arguable, opinions that are based on personal preference instead of reasons, vague terms, a scope far too large to address in a short paper, etc.).

Finally, students will write one persuasive thesis statement individually using the *Thesis Development Student Worksheet*. You may need to prompt students with possible topics such as current issues at school or in the community.

## Assessment

Monitor progress during group activity. Students may be invited to have a classmate critique their statements, revising as necessary. Individual thesis statements may be assessed using the *NHD Grading Rubric: Thesis Statement*.

## Extension

Ask students to find two or three secondary source articles about their preliminary topic and read them to find the thesis statements. Have them share and discuss their findings in groups or as a class. Allow students time to evaluate or improve their own thesis statements based upon their additional knowledge.

# Tackling the Thesis Statement

## Getting started

Topics have been chosen, research is in full swing, students are starting to ponder color schemes and costume choices. That can only mean that the time for one of the most difficult steps in the process is at hand: the writing of the thesis statement.<sup>1</sup>

A thesis statement is a central thought that holds an entire NHD project together. Early in the research process we like to call this a *working thesis*; as students gather their information, this thought can, and probably should, evolve.<sup>2</sup>

The thesis statement, best written when students are in the middle of their research so the statement is based on knowledge but still has a chance to be flexible, helps direct students through their argument and, later, judges and teachers through the project's ultimate point. It is so important, and for a lot of students, so daunting.<sup>3</sup>

By the time students present their NHD project, however, they need to have a concrete thesis supported by evidence.

### **Thesis = Topic + Theme + Impact.**

In other words, you are not just introducing your topic, you are creating an argument that expresses your topic's significance and demonstrates how the theme plays a central part.<sup>4</sup>

## Developing a thesis statement

There are no hard and fast rules for thesis-statement writing, but here are some guidelines to ease students' path:

**Keep it short.** Thesis statements should hover between 40 and 60 words. Too short, and there's not enough information to explain the argument. Too long, and it contains too many details. Plus, if the students are creating an exhibit, and they only have 500 student-composed words to use, it doesn't make sense to use up 100 of those words on just the thesis.

**Include all five W's.** The thesis is the first thing the viewer reads, so we should know immediately "*who-what-where-when*," and also "*why-is-this-important*."

**Include the theme words.** Judges and teachers need to know how the topic relates to the theme, especially if the topic is obscure, extremely narrow or isn't immediately clear in its connection to the theme words.

**Leave facts out, put arguments in.** Don't show us every detail of the topic in the thesis. Leave details for the project itself. What we need to see in the thesis is the student's argument, or the point he/she is trying to make.

**Write, revise, research, revise.** Students should not use the first draft of their thesis statement, but instead should revise based on feedback, go back to their research or conduct new research to make sure the thesis is accurate, and then revise once more.<sup>5</sup>

## Looking at examples

A thesis statement explains what you believe to be the significance and impact of your topic. Research should guide your opinion of your topic. NHD says that a good thesis statement should:

- Address a narrow topic.
- Explain what the researcher believes to be the historical significance of the topic.
- Connect the topic to the National History Day theme.<sup>6</sup>

For a demonstration, check out this building of the thesis statement:

### **Step 1: "Immigration to Milwaukee."**

This is not a thesis statement yet because it doesn't address a specific, narrow issue related to immigration to Milwaukee. What will the project examine? Health and sanitation in immigrant neighborhoods? Labor issues? The polka? There are thousands of immigration topics that a historian could research about Milwaukee. This topic needs to be narrowed quite a bit before it can be used to build a thesis.

### **Step 2: "Lizzie Black Kander and Jewish immigration to Milwaukee from 1880–1920."**

This is a nice and narrow topic, but it's still not a thesis. This phrase expresses no opinion and makes no argument about the significance of Kander and Jewish immigration.

### **Step 3: "Lizzie Black Kander used her cooking classes and *The Settlement Cookbook* to teach Milwaukee's Jewish immigrants about American culture."**

This sentence is close to a thesis statement, but it isn't quite there. The researcher now shows an opinion about the purpose of Kander's work, but still doesn't tell us why the topic is significant. What effects did *The Settlement Cookbook* and her cooking classes have? How did Kander's actions change the lives of Jewish immigrants?

### **Step 4: "Through her cooking classes and *The Settlement Cookbook*, Lizzie Black Kander introduced Milwaukee's Jewish immigrants to American culture, helping them assimilate and avoid ethnic discrimination."**

We have a winner! This thesis looks at a narrow topic, expresses an opinion and evaluates the significance of the topic. A History Day project based on this thesis statement would discuss Kander's work and show evidence that she helped immigrants assimilate and avoid discrimination.<sup>7</sup>

## The do's and don'ts of thesis statements

**Don't:** Martin Luther was born in 1483. He started the Reformation. *(Fact)*

**Do:** Beginning in 1517, Martin Luther reacted against Roman Catholic religious practices, especially the sale of indulgences, corruption and the emphasis on salvation through good works. Luther's Reformation succeeded in igniting a religious revolution, creating a new sect of faith, and later bringing change to the Roman Catholic Church.

**Don't:** Emiliano Zapata wanted land reform. Want to know why? *(Fact/Rhetorical)*

**Do:** Under the banner "Reform, Freedom, Law and Justice," Emiliano Zapata commanded revolutionary forces in southern Mexico to uplift agrarian peasants through land reform. Zapata's role in the Mexican Revolution helped foster a new constitution in 1917, which was later used to redistribute property to the nation's rural poor.

**Don't:** Franklin D. Roosevelt created the New Deal. Read more below. *(Fact/Incomplete)*

**Do:** In response to the stock market crash of 1929, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated a revolutionary "New Deal." This government reaction brought reform to the U.S. banking system and helped get Americans back to work. Roosevelt's goal of restoring economic stability would go unmet, however, until the country mobilized for war.

**Don't:** Without Norman Borlaug's Green Revolution, billions of people would have died. *("What if?" history that cannot be supported with evidence)*

**Do:** Beginning in 1944, Dr. Norman Borlaug conducted research surrounding disease-resistant wheat varieties. His successes in agricultural reform sparked the Green Revolution in several developing nations struggling with starvation. Reaction to Borlaug's work has been mixed, as farming practices have accomplished higher yields, while also undermining small scale farms and presenting negative environmental impacts.

**Don't:** Adolph Hitler was an evil man that killed a lot of Jews. *(Opinion)*

**Do:** International reaction to the atrocities of the Holocaust led to a reform of the Law of Armed Conflict through the Geneva Convention of 1949 to include the protection of civilian persons in a time of war. The Fourth Geneva Convention laid the groundwork for international humanitarian law and is used to regulate and enforce war time crimes even today.<sup>8</sup>

## Credits

1. National History Day Minnesota, "Short, Sweet and to the Point: Thesis Statements," Minnesota Historical Society, <http://education.mnhs.org/historyday/news/blog/short-sweet-and-point-thesis-statements> (accessed July 27, 2017).
2. National History Day Minnesota, "The Thesis Statement Junior," Minnesota Historical Society, <http://education.mnhs.org/historyday/sites/default/files/files/ThesisRRRJR.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2017).
3. National History Day Minnesota, "Short, Sweet and to the Point: Thesis Statements," Minnesota Historical Society, <http://education.mnhs.org/historyday/news/blog/short-sweet-and-point-thesis-statements> (accessed July 27, 2017).
4. National History Day Minnesota, "The Thesis Statement Junior," Minnesota Historical Society, <http://education.mnhs.org/historyday/sites/default/files/files/ThesisRRRJR.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2017).
5. National History Day Minnesota, "Short, Sweet and to the Point: Thesis Statements," Minnesota Historical Society, <http://education.mnhs.org/historyday/news/blog/short-sweet-and-point-thesis-statements> (accessed July 27, 2017).
6. History Day in Alaska, "Developing a Thesis Statement," History Day in Alaska, <http://www.alaskahistoryday.com/developing-a-thesis.html> (accessed July 27, 2017).
7. National History Day in Wisconsin, "A Student Guide to National History Day: Your Handbook for Survival in the Research Wilderness," Wisconsin Historical Society <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/pdfs/nhd/studentguide.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2017).
8. National History Day Minnesota, "The Thesis Statement Junior," Minnesota Historical Society, <http://education.mnhs.org/historyday/sites/default/files/files/ThesisRRRJR.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2017).

# NHD Grading Rubric: Thesis Statement

Student Name: _____		
English Teacher: _____ Hour: ____ Social Studies Teacher: _____ Hour: ____		
0 = No Evidence; 1 = Incomplete Evidence; 2 = Evident; 3 = Clearly Evident;		
Requirement: WRITE FINAL THESIS STATEMENT ON BACK OF THIS PAPER	Student Self-Evaluation:	Teacher Evaluation:
I.) Thesis includes all elements of the theme.	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
II.) Thesis states the main topic.	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
III.) Thesis clearly states the impact of the topic.	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
IV.) Topic placed in relevant historical context.	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
V.) Important who, what, when, where, why included.	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
VI.) Thesis is between 40 and 60 words in length.	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
VII.) Technical details all correct (no I, we, they, us)	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
	Total: _____	Total: _____
Student Signature: _____	Parent Signature: _____	

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

## Thesis Development Worksheet

After you have found your preliminary topic it's time to begin crafting your thesis statement. The thesis statement is ultimately what you are trying to argue about your topic. It should express your topic's significance and demonstrate a relationship to your theme. While the thesis is the central thought that holds your NHD project together, you should not begin work on it until you are midway through your research. This ensures that you have done enough research to form an argument, but allows you flexibility to change your thesis as you conduct further research.

A thesis statement can and should evolve throughout your research. By the time you have your final draft ready for presentation, you should have a concrete thesis that you support with evidence.

A thesis statement can be thought of as a cause and effect statement (this happened because of this). So, you should always be mindful of including not just the straight facts in your thesis statement, but the why of it all.

**Answering the 5 W's can help you put together a solid thesis statement. Answer these questions to help gather the facts needed to write your thesis statement:**

**Who?** Who was involved? Who was affected? Name as many people, groups and organizations that you can.

**What?** What happened? What was the main event?

**Where?** Where did the event or actions take place? If it took place in more than one location, list as many as you can.



**When?** When did it happen? How long did it last? Was it during a particular decade, century or time period? Was it during, or does it relate to, any particular war or series of great events?

**Why?** Why did it happen? What caused the event or events to happen? What led up to the event or actions in your topic?

**Why is it important?** What were the results of the event? What impact has it had on people or history?

**Now that you've gathered your facts work on your thesis. You may want to start with the main event and then write the beginning and end later.**

Background Information

Main Event or Action

Results or Impact on History

Can you prove it? How? Explain your reasoning in three to four sentences.

Thesis Statement:

**Next, show your thesis to other people and then try re-writing it a time or two.**